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Online solution makes employment law crystal clear

One Basingstoke company has just launched a pioneering online legal service designed to help small businesses cut the amount of time and cost spent on tackling employment legislation

Cleardocs offers employers tailor-made and ready-to-print employment documents, such as contracts and staff handbooks, which are both legally compliant and supported by a top UK law firm.

The service reduces the costs normally associated with legal compliance documents by up to 50% and, because it has been created by plain English experts, cuts through complex and frustrating legal jargon, enabling users to complete the paperwork online in minutes rather than hours.

Business development director Frances Critchlow said: "Research shows that small businesses find the cost and time dealing and keeping up-to-date with employment legislation is one of the biggest headaches they have to cope with.

"The complexities of employment law make it a minefield, meaning employers have to be aware of all sorts of issues, from maternity and paternity leave, to mobile phone and private car use and grievance procedures. For a small business, especially one where the owner or managing director is responsible for HR issues as well as delivering day-to-day business activity, that's a huge learning curve.

"Cleardocs' online service is different from anything else in the UK market, providing an easy to understand, cost-effective and flexible way for employers to comply with the law. It protects them against liability, ensures their employees are aware of their rights and obligations, and is backed by lawyers offering 100% impartial legal expertise. In addition, Cleardocs has a free helpline, and for questions concerning Cleardocs products, a free legal helpline manned by specialist employment experts.

The new service currently provides employers with four products:

- A standard staff contract
- An executive staff contract
- A grievance and disciplinary compliant staff handbook
- A best practice staff handbook.

"In many cases the standard contract may be all that is needed for employees but if, for example, they are entitled to a bonus or commission or have access to highly confidential information which could be useful if they were to go and work for a competitor, then it's important to set down restrictions in a more detailed executive contract," said Critchlow.

And while a grievance and disciplinary compliant staff handbook sets down formal processes that should be adhered to, the best practice handbook covers "just about everything you could imagine or need to think about". It is also very easy to tailor through the online interface.

"A staff handbook is effectively a shared vision of how employees should work together," Critchlow added. "It's something

everyone should be aware of and agree with and, providing the procedures are followed, there should be no surprises."

If any reminder were needed, she says the two main reasons why companies find themselves involved in employment tribunals is because they either didn't have a written process in the first place or, they did have one but failed to follow it. In these cases, an average of nine out of 10 tribunals will find in favour of the employee, something which could be avoided if the correct procedures were put in place and adhered to.

Cleardocs is aimed primarily at small businesses with less than 50 employees where HR is often an "add on" to another role, rather than the job of a dedicated professional. Interest since its launch in June has ranged from small IT and communications consultancies to a provider of secretarial services, a hairdresser and a hospital.

Family-owned and run businesses are seen as particularly vulnerable to dissatisfied employees as very often family members relied on trust and a "gentleman's agreement" rather than formal contracts, something which changes as the company expands to take on more staff, but without putting the necessary legal framework in place.

According to research by The Federation of Small Businesses, SMEs say cost is the biggest concern associated with employment legislation, together with the increased threat of legal action, time spent on administration and difficulty in understanding requirements.

Cleardocs' pay-as-you-go fees start at £110 for a standard contract and £255 for a staff handbook, providing both a cost-effective and legally safe solution.

The simplicity of its service is that each product is broken down into a step-by-step process with questions completed, saved and edited at a later date until the user is completely happy with the finer details. All

completed documentation is stored securely.

While some questions are answered with simple yes and no radio buttons, other questions give a variety of answer options or free text boxes, enabling each contract to be tailored as necessary.

Where some responses – such as the amount of annual leave due to employees – can be standardised across all contracts, prompts will pop up to advise the user on previous answers to help save time.

Start and finish dates for fixed contract employees and permanent contracts can easily be tracked, and questions are broken down into different sections, including benefits, bonuses and commission.

Advice alerts on topics such as opt-out options to the 48 hour working week or the legal position on requiring staff to work on bank holidays, provide additional guidance. And, as any changes in the law take place during the year, customers are kept up-to-date through automatic email alerts.

Cleardocs was first launched in 2003 in Australia by Christopher Balmford, former lawyer and plain English expert, who is also president of Clarity, an international association dedicated to promoting plain legal language. In the Australian market, it is now used by more than 8,000 professional accountants, financial planners and lawyers.

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clarity | simplicity | ease of use

